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Abstract: The article considers some key differences between Harper's poetic treatment of Margaret Garner's life in "The Slave Mother, A Tale of the Ohio" and Morrison's fictional diversion from actual historical events in *Beloved*. The essay critiques the creative reasoning of the author's imaginary with regards to the ghost's haunting of her family, especially her mother. The essay also considers the inclusion of the ghost at the end of the opera, *Margaret Garner*, another problematic that runs counter to a 'realizable' appreciation of her true story.

Keywords: slavery, imaginary, history, memory, narrative.

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The Ghost Got It Wrong: Frances E. W. Harper's and Toni Morrison's Representations of Margaret Garner. A Century A/Part

Melba Joyce Boyd

While I was reflecting on the premise for this paper, I engaged an argument with a dear friend and writer about what I viewed as critical differences between the creative interpretations or improvisations on Margaret Garner's life in the poem, "The Slave Mother, A Tale of the Ohio" (1870) by Frances E. W. Harper and in the novel, *Beloved* (1987) by Toni Morrison. We were having a late dinner at a restaurant in an historic building in Detroit, directly across the street from the Museum of Contemporary Art and Design, a modern arts exhibit and performance space where my friend had just given the debut reading for his latest collection of poetry, which is a dramatic enactment of historical events and personalities.

I have taken time to describe the setting and the context for this evening because we were dining in a mansion built by some nineteenth century robber baron. (I believe the story provided on a brochure in the vestibule states he made his fortune in timber, which partially explains the unfortunate devastation of Michigan forestry during earlier centuries. But, I digress.). My friend's long poem is populated with famous characters and situations, including settings such as the dinner meeting between Theodore Roosevelt and Booker T. Washington in the White House on 16 October 1901. In a way, his provocative reimagining of history simulates Frances Harper's reenactment of Margaret Garner's tragic story in the poem, "The Slave Mother, A Tale of the Ohio." He gives voice to historic figures and contextualizes these racialized experiences with poetic wit and social critique.

So, when I stated the key difference between the representations by the two writers was that Frances Harper's poem was a historical re-imagining and comment on the motivations that precipitated Margaret Garner's

“deed of fearful daring” (Harper 86), while Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* is an improvised, imagined life of a fictional character Sethe, and scarcely related to Margaret Garner’s fate or history, he said, “I don’t believe in history.” No doubt, I was taken aback. I then asked him to elaborate, at which point he said, “History is the official record of those in power, and has little to do with what people actually experience.”

On the one hand, this is true. History is an account of events, and more often than not, the ‘story’ of the conqueror. Black Americans, like any previously colonized people, should be distrustful and suspicious of history because we have been misrepresented, maligned, and flat out lied about as European invaders justified, rationalized, manipulated, and altered historical occurrences to their advantage. But on the other hand, it has been the painstaking, thorough investigations of those same occurrences by conscientious historians that have disavowed, contradicted and even revolutionized our reading of American history. However, some mainstream historians are still actively engaged in revisionist strategies to excuse atrocities and ignore injustices for the sake of patriotism and white nationalism.

At the same time, historical clarity and transparency of a complex, multi-dimensional reality is essential for humanity to achieve its full potential; at least this is my optimistic view of the value of history. Otherwise, Americans will continue to compromise equalitarian principles to the benefit of ethnocentric madness that will never jive with what is true.

Frances Harper’s “The Slave Mother, A Tale of the Ohio” is a dramatic poem that gives voice to Margaret Garner in a persona who reveals the terrors of slavery that drove her to kill her 2-year-old daughter, Mary. Historian Delores M. Walters encapsulates the ordeal in the opening of her essay, “Margaret Garner”:

On January 28, 1856, Margaret Garner was facing recapture and return to slavery, when she killed her two-year-old daughter, and attempted to kill her other three children, in order to prevent them from being re-enslaved. Described as an unnamed “mulatto” on the 1850 Slave Census, Margaret was an enslaved domestic on the Archibald K. Gaines farm in Richwood (Boone County), Kentucky. Pregnant and 22 years old, at the time of her escape, Margaret was accompanied by her husband Robert Garner, 21 years old, his parents and her four children, ages 9 months to 6 years. The family fled from Kentucky in record cold temperatures, crossing the frozen Ohio River into Cincinnati, Ohio. (n. pag.)

Garner chose death over life as a slave. Such an extreme action was not usual, and it was not unheard of. Enslaved women suffocated newborns, and explained these deaths as stillborns. Moreover, suicide was also not an uncommon occurrence for nineteenth century women, black or white.

Because of their lack of power in public and domestic spheres, disparaging women sometimes resulted to extreme measures to escape emotional pain, or public humiliation in a society that, as Frances Harper puts it in the poem "A Double Standard," "shames the woman and excuses the man" (qtd. in Boyd 69-70).

In the case of the enslaved woman, the suffering was intensified not only by the physical, mental and psychological abuse she endured, but also by her incapacity to protect her children from the same fate. The initial stanzas of "The Slave Mother, A Tale of the Ohio" is written in the first person, giving voice to Margaret Garner, a poetic strategy Harper employed in many of her poems, especially for her female personae. The absence or silencing of women in the public sphere contributed to the patriarchal domination of the so-called free society as well as in representations of slavery. Slave narratives were dominated by the male voice, while the sexual abuse of black women was rarely the topic of focus at anti-slavery lectures because Victorian values repressed American society's willingness to discuss such indiscretions in public forums.

Harper's poetry and lectures illuminate and dramatize often overlooked or diminished subjects such as these to educate and move her audiences to oppose such conditions that persisted within the institution of slavery. Harper's abolitionist poetry is grounded in historical moments and drawn from personal testimonies she heard from slaves in Baltimore, Maryland or from fugitives escaping to northern territories along the Underground trails. Unlike most nineteenth-century writers, she was an engaged activist, not a removed observer. She was also a "Woman's Rights"¹ activist and understood the systems of female entrapment and repression in the 'free world.' Therefore, her poetic strategy executed an aesthetic that incorporated gender into racial and political themes. These poems appeared in black and white periodicals, which contradicts the longstanding and inaccurate projection that early black writers wrote primarily for white audiences. Her poetry, stories, serialized novels and essays appeared in the African Methodist Episcopal's *Christian Recorder*, the *Frederick Douglass Paper*, William Lloyd Garrison's *The Liberator*, *The Provincial Freeman* (a Canadian newspaper) and similar progressive publications. She wrote for anyone who could read, or would be willing to listen to her words.

Since Harper incorporated her poetry into her lectures before black, white or integrated audiences, the oral recitations were a critical consideration in the drafting of her written works. Many who listened to her readings were illiterate; hence the reason she elected the ballad as the dominant form for her earlier poems. The language is accessible, both in terms

of recognizable imagery and sound structures more closely related to folk traditions, which facilitates memory and remembrance.

I should also note that the persona in "The Slave Woman, A Tale of the Ohio" is not identified by name. Why does Harper withhold Margaret Garner's name? In other poems about historical instances or events, Harper identifies the personae. In comparison, when she does give tribute to her subjects, they are usually dead or free persons. Perhaps by not including any reference to Garner, Harper was broadening the application of the travesty to other instances. Or, perhaps she took the title from the article, "A Visit to the Slave Mother Who Killed Her Child," that appeared in the *National Anti-Slavery Standard* on March 15, 1856. In any case it was not Harper's intention to blame Garner for what occurred, but rather, to identify the institution of slavery as the impetus and the cause for the tragedy.

Like Harper's poem, *Beloved* includes certain historical occurrences and includes language that the times evoked, but what I find disturbing is the radical diversion from what actually happened to Margaret Garner, who did not live a free life in Ohio after killing her child, but was returned to slavery with her husband and children, and eventually sold down the river. In fact, one of her children died by drowning somewhere near New Orleans in a boat accident. If one considers this 'history,' the novel becomes even more foreboding, as *Beloved* emerges from the river in the novel and in the cinematic adaptation as a child/woman to reunite with her mother. But, even before she is 'resurrected,' the haunting drives her brothers to desert their mother and their home, and it undermines her sister Denver's capacity to function in the outside world, making her a prisoner of her mother's history and the ghost. Because of the murder of the child, the black community shuns Sethe, and in this isolation, she is unable to reconcile the grief or guilt for the deed. Stamp Paid reveals Sethe's deed to her lover, Paul D, by showing him the newspaper article, and it is this documentation that affirms and condemns Sethe and repels Paul D.

I find this aspect of the plot disturbing because blame for the death of the child, as Harper aptly points out in the last stanzas of her poem, should be placed squarely on the institution of slavery, not on the slave mother. Though Morrison's narrative in *Beloved* does indict slavery for the tragic death of the child, the actions of the ghost and the attitude of the people in the community are not very forgiving, which runs contrary to the views of the abolitionists and the black community living in Cincinnati at that time. In the second half of Harper's poem, the perspective changes from the first person, the voice of Margaret Garner, to the third person, the omniscient narrator, whose voice is oppositional to white public opinion and reflective of the politics of the Abolitionist Movement. In the last four stanzas, Harper makes her appeal:

A moment in the sunlight
She held a glimmering knife.
The next moment she had bathed it
In the crimson fount of life.

They snatched away the fatal knife,
Her boys shrieked wild with dread;
The baby girl was pale and cold,
They raised it up; the child was dead.

Sends this deed of fearful daring
Through my country's heart no thrill,
Do the icy hands of slavery
Every pure emotion chill?

Oh! If there is any honor,
Truth or justice in hand,
Will ye not, as men and Christians,
On the side of freedom stand? (85-86).

I think Morrison's ghost should have haunted Archibald Gaines, the slave owner. In sync with Harper's poetic perspective, he is certainly the source of evil and the purveyor of oppression that instigated the crime. Lucy Stone, a woman's rights activist and a prominent abolitionist, met with Margaret Garner while she was jailed. Subsequently, Stone provided an illuminating testimony that the near-white complexion of Garner's children was evidence of rape. Other corroborating evidence was presented that strongly suggested that the child was probably the daughter of Gaines, and that he had fathered her other children as well. They were obviously mulatto, and not the offspring of Margaret and her husband (Bassett 1).

The institutionalized rape of enslaved women was pervasive and was a subject largely avoided in historical discussions about slavery until recent decades with the ascendance of African American Studies and Women's Studies and scholars documenting and revealing this form of racial terrorism. However, despite DNA evidence, some of Thomas Jefferson's relatives still refuse to acknowledge their black relatives and some Jefferson scholars still deny that this President of the United States fathered the children of Sally Hemings. In order to understand Margaret Garner's trauma, institutionalized rape has to be a consideration in the deliberation; however, the 1850 Fugitive Slave Act overruled the state's attorney, who argued Ohio was a free state and Garner should not be remanded to Gaines and returned to Kentucky.

It was clearly a moment of “temporary insanity”² on Margaret Garner’s part to kill her child and to attempt to kill her other children and herself. However, it was the only recourse she foresaw – to destroy the master’s property. Clearly, as Harper suggests in her poem, the slave-owner terrorist is the guilty party here. If the event had been made into a “Law and Order” episode, Archibald Gaines would have been charged with multiple cases of rape, kidnapping and civil rights violations. However, it is not a television episode, but it was adapted into film, reconfiguring the novel into such horrific imagery that it haunted my subconscious for weeks, giving me nightmares.

Another problem with the novel is that the child was innocent, untainted by adult sins. So, why in death did she not ascend to heaven as a pure spirit? (My friend rejected this suggestion because he said it was a Christian concept. Just like his disbelief in history, he doesn’t believe in Christianity either.) There is a Christian morality espoused at the end of the novel, and it appears as a key component in the beliefs of the characters; especially the women who pray and chant the ghost back to its proper sphere in another dimension. So, it’s not a matter of whether or what we believe, but what is incorporated in the beliefs of the characters. Does the exorcism suggest that the ghost is evil, or that her manifestation was simply an illusion, or that there is no history, no living, only dreaming? Or, is this remembering of slavery a creative solution for reconciliations between mothers and daughters for the sins committed within circumstances beyond their control?

Now, as my Detroit students might say, I’m not dealing in any “hateration”³ on Toni Morrison. She is a brilliant writer, and my opinion is of little consequence to the literati. At the same time, I don’t believe the novel has changed the way most African Americans remember slavery because they, like most Americans, are generally deprived of any comprehensive view of slavery, due to a failed educational system and the power of popular culture. Moreover, even if they do read, most of them don’t read anything as challenging as a novel written by Toni Morrison. They don’t read Frances Harper, either. If they do make it to university, and if by some remote possibility they take an African American literature course, they might gain access to one or the other writer; perhaps both in a black women’s literature course. But for the most part, they don’t think about slavery, and don’t want to re-memory anything remotely related to a dark past that has placed them at a considerable disadvantage in our present ‘history.’

I suppose the ghost story would not aggravate me as much if Morrison had not continued this motif in the libretto for the opera, *Margaret Garner* (2005). The trial and the finale are crucial departures from Garner’s biography. In the opera, Garner is hanged after being tried and found guilty

for killing her child. Garner's body is suspended, center stage, and when the theatre goes black, her ghost moves in and out of the audience. This disturbing and grotesque image supplies a dramatic ending and implies that Margaret Garner continues to haunt our American reality. However, the suggestion is as false as the ghost in *Beloved*. What is constant in both compositions is that Margaret Garner's biography is truncated and her ending hidden, and only those who have researched history or read Steven Weisenberger's book, *Modern Medea: A Family Story of Slavery and Child*, surmise the full meaning of Garner's life or death.

On March 11, 1856, *The Liberator* reported that the steamboat *Henry Lewis*, on which the Garners were being transported, began to sink after colliding with another boat. Margaret Garner and her baby daughter were thrown overboard during the collision. The baby drowned. It was reported that Margaret was happy that her baby had died and that she tried to drown herself. She and Robert were kept in Arkansas only a short time before being sent to Gaines' family friends in New Orleans to be household servants. The Garners then disappeared from sight. Until 1870 when a reporter from *The Cincinnati Chronicle* found Robert Garner, and he recounted their fate, explaining that they had worked in New Orleans until sold as plantation labor in Tennessee Landing, Mississippi. Margaret died in 1858 from Typhoid Fever. Robert said that before she died, Margaret urged him to "never marry again in slavery, but to live in hope of freedom" (qtd. in Weisenburger 98). Their love transcended everything, including unimaginable suffering. Now this is a story worth retelling as historical fiction or as a film, and to her credit, Morrison does relay their marital devotion in the libretto.

My writer/friend's position is that *Beloved* is about the relationship between the mother and the child, and not about the history of slavery. I consented to that as the thematic purpose of the novel; however, I still feel this re-memory could have taken place within the historical context of what actually happened to Margaret Garner after the trial.

It is one thing to create a fictional character derived from a single occurrence. It can be creatively rationalized that such a character and her consciousness provide insight into moments of extreme despair, but to change a person's ultimate ending, to insert a trial for murder, and to then have her executed is more than disturbing, it is unfair and unjust. If we are going to rewrite history, why wasn't Garner exonerated for reasons of temporary insanity? Why must her literary persona be condemned to haunt the purgatory of the American imaginary?

In the opera, Margaret Garner's image was transformed into a spectacle for performance. It seems a disservice to use her as some form of bourgeois guilt that lasts only as long as the drive home after the opera be-

cause the American public is immune to ghost stories and vampires. These fictions mean so little that even President Abraham Lincoln appears as a vampire slayer in a 2012 film. Audiences sit comfortably in the dark, titillated by the illusion of the supernatural, but blameless within the aesthetic distance that separates them from time, space and historical consequence.

Unlike my friend, I believe there is history, and only close and honest scrutiny of excavated events can render true understanding, which is essential if we are ever going to transcend the racial fictions that continue to undermine our lives and our national destiny. Deliberating with gothic ghosts in a novel or in the theatre is fantastical escapism. We must deal with the deadly consequences of past lives and past lies because false interpretations of history protect the aspirations of those who wish to maintain power for a privileged few, who don't believe in any truth, and therefore do not acknowledge the inhumanity of slavery or accept responsibility for the legacy of persistent discriminatory and oppressive conditions today.

Slavery assaulted millions of innocent people during and after emancipation, and it has been reinvented in various guises and through neo-enslavement systems sanctioned by disproportionate enforcement of laws in an unjust criminal justice system. To that end, I believe America is much more comfortable with a plot where the slave mother is haunted by the child, and the slave master and his descendants remain invisible and unindicted; or, with an ending wherein an innocent woman is hung by the neck for the crime of centuries—slavery. Margaret Garner's killing of her 2-year-old daughter Mary was a desperate act of a mother's love to spare her child a preordained, manmade hell that still haunts the United States of America. If you don't believe me, ask the ghost of Trayvon Martin.

Oh! If there is any honor,
Truth or justice in hand,
Will ye not, as men and Christians,
On the side of freedom stand? (Harper 86)

Notes

- ¹ The historical term is “Woman’s Rights” because it was the “Woman’s Rights Movement” not “Women’s Rights,” which is a 20th-century term.
- ² “Temporary insanity” is a legal term, which is used as an argument by the defense against guilt usually in a trial for murder or assault. It confers the belief that the killing would not have occurred if extreme aggravation had not precipitated the action. This is, of course, an American legal term, and perhaps not universally practiced. However, it does not imply that the person is insane.
- ³ “Hateration” is a word in contemporary African American dialect that means to engage in an act of hatred that is motivated by a negative or jealous impulse in order to demean or to diminish the accomplishment of another.

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